You know that scene in *Gone with the Wind*? You know the one where Scarlett O'Hara can’t raise enough money to pay the taxes on Tara? With her antebellum plantation in desperate need of a Reconstructionist rehab, she seeks the aid of her Mammy by jerking down the curtain rod that holds one last Tara-esque bastion of elegance: a pair of forest green velveteen drapes fringed in gold. Scarlett O'Hara is on a mission: to visit Captain Rhett Butler, jailed in a stable, to see if she can coax enough money from the dashing blockade runner to pay the back taxes that the carpetbaggers are bent on swindling out of Scarlet. You know that look of determination in those cat-eyes of Vivian Leigh, that look of tenacity embedded in this Southern-belle-turned-protector-of-the-keep.

Now, I wasn’t blessed with Leigh’s engaging moss-green eyes, nor was I ever anything close to a pampered Georgian brat. But tenacity? I can muster tenaciousness if the occasion calls for it. And I discovered this sometimes beneficial, other times detrimental, characteristic at the age of seven. It was the end-of-year ballet class party of the Miss Rosalie Stubbs Dance Studio on Alta Vista Drive in La Cresta. (La Cresta is Bakersfield’s first ‘burb, and once upon a post-modern time, it was a sublime, middle class neighborhood bisected by Alta Vista’s string of shops and businesses that ascended uphill to the pricey Panorama Drive, but now it’s just another east-of-99 blighted ‘hood.) My ballet teacher, Miss Ruth, was a petite, middle-aged
woman. She taught ballet. Miss Rosalie taught tap. Miss Ruth wore her chestnut, Dippity-Do’ed hair in a bun that set high upon the back of her head. (Miss Rosalie had dyed red hair as avant garde as Miss Belle Watling’s—another femme fatale from *Gone with the Wind.* ) The bun wasn’t at the base of Miss Ruth’s skull, nor was it at the tip-top of her pate. It was in the middle and pulled so taut it used to remind me of when my mother would brush my hair back into a pony tail until it felt like my eyes were being stretched to my temples. She had oversized teeth that dominated her otherwise demure face and her voice was gravelly like a smoker’s. And since this was the early 1960s, I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if Miss Ruth was a smoker.

This was the teacher that I adored so much that one particular week, Miss Ruth announced that beginning the following Saturday, there would be a make-up class for the ballet students who missed any after school classes. I didn’t catch the operative word “missed.” I just honed in on the term, “make-up.” So I purposely feigned a sore throat and chills so I would miss my regularly scheduled lesson so I could attend the make-up class. Thinking I had hit the mother lode of glamour. I went to the Saturday make-up class. But glaringly absent were the usual accoutrements of glamour: mascara, lipstick, rouge, and powder blue eye shadow. How disappointed I was when I realized it was time to go to the barre and begin our usual regimen of the first and second positions, the plies and jetes. Even though I felt embarrassingly duped, I still loved Miss Ruth.

So when the end of the school year came and Miss Ruth announced that there was going to be an end-of-dance-school tea party, I made sure I heard right. A tea party?! A dress-up tea party?! Ohhh, I couldn’t contain myself! We would get to dress up?! As in I didn’t have to wear the regimented black leotard and tights?! As in I would get to wear high heels and make the click, click, click sound on the hardwood dance floors?! After she handed out the printed
info and told us to be sure to let our parents know, we were dismissed. I excitedly rushed over to the wooden chairs lined up against the wall and got my dance bag, sat on the floor, and changed into my street shoes—usually a pair of canvas sneakers with that babyish white anti-scruff rubber strip across the toe. When my mom came to pick me up after she got off work, I remember telling her all about the imminent party. There would probably be little cookies and maybe even those little cakes that were cut out in little shapes with frosting on them. “Oh, those are called petit fours,” my mom said with a smile, looking in the rear view mirror while I chatted incessantly about how I could not wait for a real live tea party. This wasn’t going to be a pretend tea party with my dolls as my guests and where I used an old tin tea party set that belonged to my older sister, Christine. I was certain there would be real liquid in the cups at Miss Ruth’s, maybe even lemonade or punch! With real people! Not my Raggedy Ann, not my Tiny Tears, not even my Barbie doll. Miss Ruth’s tea party was going to have the girls in my dance class and it was next week!

I conducted my own internal countdown to the party. What I didn’t know was that there was absolutely no money for a fancy dress, or dress-up high heels, or a hat. What I didn’t know is that each and every month my grandmother paid the tuition at Miss Rosalie Stubbs Dance Studio. What I also didn’t know is that each winter when the costumes were announced for the upcoming June recital, it was my grandmother who paid for the pink and silver tutu, and for the ice blue and sequined tutu, and for the blue and green tutu. Every year, she purchased them all. And I didn’t know my mother wondered how she could obtain a new tea party dress for her daughter.

As the days slowly passed, the weekend finally arrived~~the time when my mom had the time to shop, sew, clean, iron, ensure Christine practiced her piano, ferry my brothers, Mike and Randy, to their JBA games, prepare a Sunday dinner for Grandma (sigh) and
Grandpa Nichols and cram anywhere from eighty to a hundred hours into forty eight. So Saturday came, and to this day, I am thankful I had not yet reached the age to where having an altered dress from my mother’s closet wasn’t a stigma. I looked upon my tea party dress as the most ingenious invention ever. Had I been 8 or 9—the age when I started getting more conscientious of what I perceived as wealth—I wouldn’t have been as grateful, nor as excited, about my dress-up “gown.” Because by the time I was a 9-year-old, wealth meant a double-wide, black vinyl Barbie doll clothes case that closeted at least a dozen outfits, red Keds tennis shoes (without the babyish anti-scuff rubber toe strip), and a blue Schwinn, not a Huffy, three-speed bicycle.

Lifting the wooden hinged lid that housed the black Singer sewing machine, my mother reached into the console cabinet and swung and pulled the Singer up and rested it on the other hinged wooden panel. The machine was in place. Wielding a black polished cotton dress I had seen many times toward the back of my mother’s closet, she said, “We’re going to make this into a pretty tea party dress.” And away she went. With a snip of her black-handled scissors here and some straight pins jutting out between her clamped lips there, my mother proceeded to turn a dress from yesteryear into my “pretty tea party dress.” Like I said before, it was black polished cotton with an adorable shawl collar that was black and white striped. “Will I still have the collar?” I asked. My mother assured me the collar would remain intact. What I didn’t know—and what was to my utter astonishment and delight—was the fact she took the extra yardage from the gathered dress skirt and pouffed, pulled, and stitched the surplus into a bustle! Oh, this whole dress remodel reminded me of Cinderella and the mice, Jacque and Gus, and all the others who scurry about to produce Cinderella’s dress for the ball. Instead of the bluebirds who fly into the cottage with the ribbon, my mother cinched up the waist to fit my frame. I skipped around the house. I made my bed. I picked up my clothes. I made sure all my
dolls were either propped up against my lavender corduroy bed pillows and my toys were all put away. Any chore I could perform to ensure my mom had enough time to keep altering the dress I did, so she could stay focused on the dress. In what seemed like an eternity, my mother announced at last that the dress was almost done and I could now try it on. “Careful. There’s still some pins. I have to make sure it will fit before I finish the seams,” my mother cautioned as she held the voluminous skirt over my head. With my hands high above my head, palms together and pointed as if about to perform a high dive, I stood erect while my mother slid the dress over my shoulders. An errant pin softly scraped my rib, but I didn’t care. I was emerging from the dress and I could see the black-and-white shawl collar coming to a halt on my shoulders and the rest of the dress falling into place. It was perfect. “Turn around, Darlene,” my mother said with a slight smile. I didn’t turn. I twirled. And twirled. And twirled. “I love the bustle. I look like someone from the 1800s!” I said delightedly. My mother stood there in my bedroom that I shared with my big sister, Chris, and just nodded her head and smiled. Next, came a pair of my mother’s black patent leather high heels. She stuffed them with Kleenices, a wad for each toe box. As I stepped into them, and then slid my size 10 child’s shoe size into her women’s 7 1/2, I thought to myself that when I grew up, I would always wear high heels. My mother disappeared for a moment and came back from her bedroom with the final piece de resistance: a pair of white gloves. But these weren’t ordinary white gloves. These little fab fifties numbers that would cloak my digits were elbow length with shirred sides. Mama Mia! I thought I had hit fashion Valhalla! I wobbled along my hardwood floors emphasizing each step so I could hear the click, click, click of the pump heels. And, oh, how they clicked! But I knew I needed to practice because, like I just said, I was wobbly. Noticeably. And just when I thought it couldn’t possibly get any better…out came a double strand of pearls and a set of pearl earrings. Sure, it was costume jewelry, but I didn’t know
Facing the mirror of the early-American, maple wood dresser, I started walking around my bedroom in a circle to check out all the angles—especially the back so I could see that bustle. And the rustle of the polished cotton skirt was downright reverential. Soon it was time to remove the dress so the finishing touches could be made, and those pins could be removed. And to remove the gloves, I pulled on each cloth “finger” with my teeth—like I had seen Marilyn Monroe or Ava Gardner or one of those bombshells do in the movies. I stepped out of the patent pumps and back into my round-toed sneaker sphere and then anxiously awaited the tea party.

The day came, and this time when I speared myself into the dress there were no straight pins, there was only the soft rustle of the fabric sliding down around me followed by my mother zipping up the back and fluffing the bustle. The pearls had settled around my neck, the earrings were clipped into place (they must have dwarfed my ear lobes), and then I slid into the black patent pumps. Mother upswept my hair and spritzed my chignon bun with hair spray and then added a wisp of rouge and then came some red lipstick. I didn’t want to get anything on the shirred gloves, so I waited until we pulled up to the studio before I put them on. My mom offered to help me with the gloves, but I opted out. I knew I could put those gloves on without any help.

We arrived at the tea party and all the little girls were dressed up. I remember one little girl had a fur stole on! Oh, it was gorgeous! It was luxurious! But I bet her mom didn’t make any bit of her costume like my mom had made mine. We all gathered into the cavernous ballet studio that was paneled in floor-to-ceiling mirrors. We were promenaded around the room and then we started twirling around and around with the skirts of our dresses softly brushing up against everyone else’s. As we were getting ready to play musical chairs, Miss Ruth had a special announcement. She said that there was going to be a special modeling competition.
A *modeling* competition?! Now, how could I possibly concentrate on the musical chairs game with this modeling game that was to follow? And what was this? Miss Ruth then walked over to the familiar wooden chairs and there was this grand box, with a cellophane lid and under that plastic film was a white tea set. She ceremoniously held the box aloft and passed the box before our eyes. There, nestled in the center beneath the stiff plastic sheet was a footed, flamboyant teapot flanked by an equally charming double-handled sugar bowl and creamer. Saucers fanned across the box bottom and the cups were carefully spaced across the top. “The tea set will go to the girl who shows the most poise in the modeling contest,” Miss Ruth announced. As I gawked at that box, I was reminded of the cool, gigantic toys kids on the Art Linkletter Show won for just talking about everyday stuff. They didn’t even have to walk around or do smart things like arithmetic. Just talk.

Once the musical chairs were over, the *real* game was about to begin. All the girls lined up at the back wall to await their turn. I didn’t talk to anyone. I was getting “into the zone.” I didn’t size up the competition; I just pictured in my mind walking and winning. Soon it was my turn. Using every balance technique Miss Ruth had taught me during the last nine months, I carefully stepped forward, praying I wouldn’t stumble or trip in the pumps. I took off, but I didn’t walk. I slowly strolled holding my coiffed head up high. And I heard the rustle of the skirt and that was my haute couture cue to sashay that bustle and capture Miss Ruth’s attention. I am certain that Miss Ruth had to have held her laughter in for I must have looked hilarious~~but I didn’t know that. All I knew was that I had to win that tea set. My brief catwalk experience proved victorious. I won the tea set. I beat out the girl who always got a soda from the vending machine after each lesson. I beat out the girl who arrived each week in an ice blue Cadillac with sleek fins. Because I had a clever, industrious, and thrifty mother. And a little tea~nacity.